DISTRICT 6 HUNTING PROSPECTS

Okanogan County
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DISTRICT 6 GENERAL OVERVIEW

Wildfires burned about 270,000 acres this summer in the western portion of District 6, so hunters will need to check the availability of their favorite locations before heading into the field. Updates on fires and related closures can be obtained through multiple sources, including the Okanogan National Forest, and the Washington departments of Fish and Wildlife, Natural Resources, and Transportation. As noted below, significant unburned areas exist throughout District 6, and those locations could see increased numbers of game animals.

Most of the affected lands are in the Methow Valley. As of late August, the most seriously affected GMUs in descending order of impact were Units 239, 242, and 224. Smaller portions of Units 218 and 231 also burned. At least two major fires were technically still active, but burn activity was minimal, and no significant expansion of the fire perimeters is expected.

Large areas were closed to public access in the immediate wake of the fires, but most parcels were reopened in the following weeks. Smaller area closures remained in place around the Little Bridge and Upper Falls fires, and some U.S. Forest Service roads remained closed within the Carlton Complex Fire perimeter. Flash floods and mudslides from intense thunderstorms that followed the fires caused widespread damage to primary and secondary roads, particularly in GMUs 224, 239, and 242. Periodic road closures were required in some areas, primarily along State Routes 20 (the North Cascades Highway) and 153 near Twisp. It is possible some road and area closures could last throughout the hunting season.

Wildlife fires typically do not kill a significant percentage of larger mammals or birds directly. Even so, the fires and resulting impacts are likely to significantly affect game distribution on the landscape, and these effects could be highly variable. Where fires burned intensely, wildlife will likely be scarce; however, adjacent unburned areas could actually see an influx of animals. Game prevalence in lightly or partially burned areas will likely be somewhere in between. If substantial fall rain and significant associated green-up occurs, this could mitigate the fire effects somewhat and change animal distribution further, bringing animals back into the fire perimeter at least temporarily.

Emergency changes to this year’s hunting regulations are being considered to increase antlerless deer harvest in heavily impacted areas. This will likely be accomplished through the use of increased youth, senior, disabled, 2nd deer, and master hunter permits drawn from this year’s applicant pool for relevant GMUs; however, specific details are still being worked out. Additionally, damage related permits will also be used to address anticipated agricultural nuisance issues as they develop.
Individual write-ups below are independent of the fire effects unless specifically noted in red. Whenever possible, we will update this site with more current and specific information. In the meantime, fire-related information is available on the following websites:

http://inciweb.nwcg.gov/
http://www.geomac.gov/viewer/viewer.shtml
http://www.fs.usda.gov/okawen
http://www.wdfw.wa.gov/wildfires/

District Overview

District 6 abuts the Canadian border in north-central Washington and encompasses 10 Game Management Units: 203 (Pasayten), 204 (Okanogan East), 209 (Wannacut), 215 (Sinlahekin), 218 (Chewuch), 224 (Perrygin), 231 (Gardner), 233 (Pogue), 239 (Chiliwist), and 242 (Alta). The western two-thirds of the district, stretching from the Okanogan River to the Pacific Crest, lies on the east slope of the Cascade Range and is dominated by mountainous terrain that generally gets more rugged as you move from east to west. Vegetation in this portion of the district ranges from desert/shrub-steppe at the lowest elevations through various types of conifer forests, culminating in alpine tundra on the higher peaks that top out at almost 9,000 feet. More than three-quarters of the land base in this portion of the county is in public ownership, offering extensive hunting access. Game is plentiful and dispersed throughout the area for most of the year, concentrating in the lower elevations in winter when deep snows cover much of the landscape.

GMU 204 includes the eastern one-third of the district (from the Okanogan River east to the Okanogan County line) and is moderately rolling terrain, generally rising in elevation as you move east. The vegetation changes from shrub-steppe near the Okanogan River to a mix of tall grass and conifer forest throughout the remainder of the unit. This portion of the district is roughly a 50-50 patchwork of public and private land with the public lands generally being higher in elevation. Again, game is plentiful and dispersed throughout.
Weather in the Okanogan District can be quite variable and capable of changing quickly in the fall. Be prepared for everything from warm, sunny days to the possibility of winter temps and significant snow at higher elevations by the second week of October.

Please be respectful of private land and treat land owners and their property the way you would want to be treated if roles were reversed.

Agency biologists will be running a biological check and information station at the Red Barn in Winthrop both weekends of the modern firearm general deer season. We encourage hunters to stop and provide data to biologists whether you’ve harvested a deer or not; data collected assists in assessing herd health and shaping population management.
Elk are few and far between in Okanogan County, particularly west of the Okanogan River. In GMU 204, where the majority of the District’s limited harvest occurs, elk are a bit more abundant and on the increase, but still generally occur only in small groups scattered over the landscape, primarily in the Unit’s eastern half. Hunters are reminded that the elk regulations have changed in GMU 204 to an “any bull” general season harvest instead of the traditional any-elk season.

**2013 District 6 Elk Harvest Summary:** Elk are scarce in Okanogan County, and District 6 hunters harvested only 17 in 2013, five more than in 2012. Eight of the 17 came from GMU 204, and all but two were taken by modern firearm hunters.

**2013 District 6 Elk Harvest Statistics:** [Elk Total Harvest]

District 6 supports the largest migratory mule deer herd in the state and Okanogan County has long been prized by hunters for its mule deer hunting. Prospects for mule deer look good again this year. Winter fawn survivorship and associated recruitment have been at or above average four of the last five years and hunters can expect to see moderate numbers of younger bucks. Post-season buck ratios in December of 2013 were down somewhat as compared to the previous year; however, the observed ratio of 25 bucks per 100 does is still excellent and should translate into good carryover or older age-class bucks.

During the early general seasons deer will be widely distributed on the landscape and not yet concentrated in migration areas or on winter range. Mature bucks in particular are often at high elevations in remote locations as long as succulent vegetation is available. In general look for deer taking advantage of the rejuvenated summer forage within recent burns including the 2006 Tripod Fire, as well as other areas holding green forage into the fall. Deer are likely to be particularly attracted to more moist environments this year given the especially hot, dry summer. *In late August, it was noted that if significant fall green-up materialized in this summer’s burn areas, those areas could attract sizeable numbers of deer. In addition, many areas on private lands adjacent to the fires saw an influx of displaced deer and associated damage. These conditions could make it a good year to seek landowner permission for hunting access in fire affected areas.*

During the late permit seasons, the majority of deer will have moved to winter range areas at lower elevations on more southerly slopes. In District 6, WDFW Wildlife Areas and immediately adjacent federal lands are good bets for high deer numbers in late fall, although in low snow years, some mature bucks may linger at higher elevations.
Most of the winter range in Units 239 and 242, and much of the high density winter range in Unit 224, burned in this summer’s fires. Significant changes to deer distribution and abundance in those units was anticipated; however, as of late August, it was still too early to accurately predict specific effects. Late permit hunt changes were being considered for GMUs heavily impacted by the fires. Individual notifications were planned for permit holders if any permit hunt changes were implemented.

For those hunters with 2nd deer permits in Deer areas 2012 -2016, remember that those permits are good only on private land. Permit holders are responsible for making contact with private land owners to secure hunting access.

Changes to the geographic scope of Deer area 2012 were being considered in late August as a result of fire impacts to surrounding GMUs. Individual notifications were planned for permit holders if any permit hunt changes were implemented.

Generally speaking, white-tailed deer are significantly less abundant than mule deer west of the Okanogan River but are found in most all drainages up to mid-elevations, particularly those with significant riparian vegetation. The Sinlahekin Valley and surrounding lands in portions of Unit 215 are the exception, supporting a robust whitetail population.

In this area, many white-tailed deer are found on private lands, so prospective hunters wishing to target white-tailed deer may want to seek permission in advance of the season to access individual ownerships. The eastern one-third of the district (GMU 204) holds roughly equal numbers of mule and white-tailed deer and both are widely distributed across the unit on both private and public land.

No new regulation changes are on tap for the 2014 general seasons.

2013 District 6 Deer Harvest Summary: General season hunters harvested 2,047 deer from the 10 game management units comprising District 6, down slightly as compared to 2012. Similarly, general season success rates fell a bit for most user groups, but improved modestly for muzzleloaders and ended up as follows: Modern – 14%, Muzzleloader – 25%, Archery – 24%, and Mulit – 21%. Special permit holders harvested 337 deer in District 6, 195 antlerless and 142 bucks.

Modern firearm hunters accounted for about 68 percent of the general season harvest, and archers took about 53% of the total antlerless harvest. As is typical, GMU 204 (the District’s largest unit) yielded the greatest overall deer harvest (648 animals). GMUs 215, 218, 224, and 233 also produced good tallies. These five units combined accounted for 74% of the total number of deer taken in District 6.
Black bears are abundant and well distributed throughout District 6. The population and associated harvest appears to be relatively stable, so hunting prospects in the district should be good. Bears will likely be widely distributed on the landscape and keying in on local berry concentrations where available. This means they will be shifting up in elevation and into moister areas as the season progresses. Berry fields at higher elevations towards the Pacific Crest will ripen latest but will probably peak early this year (possibly starting as early as late August) due to the hot dry weather. The late August fires likely made bears scarce in the affected areas since natural food availability was extremely limited in those locations.

For hunters pursuing black bear in the northern Cascades, it is critical for you to positively identify the bear species, as endangered grizzly bears potentially also inhabit these areas. We
have posted on our web site some interactive training materials from BeBearAware.org to help you tell the difference between black and grizzly bears. Click here, then view the Interactive Bear Identification Program and take the Bear Identification Test.

**2013 District 6 Black Bear Harvest Summary:** District 6 hunters harvested 103 black bear last season in the Okanogan Bear Management Unit (BMU 5), an 11% decrease from the 2012 tally. Last year, bears pursued robust berry crops throughout the district and harvest was spread accordingly across all GMUs. GMU 204 in the Northeastern BMU again led the way with 42 animals taken.

**2013 District 6 Black Bear Harvest Statistics:** Okanogan BMU Black Bear Harvest
Northeastern BMU Black Bear Harvest

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**BLACK BEAR – SCOTT FITKIN**

**COUGAR**

District 6 cougar populations are healthy and well distributed. Cougars follow the deer herds, which means they will be spread across the landscape through late October and then start to concentrate more on lower elevations as deer move to winter range. Much cougar foraging activity takes place at night, so the best opportunities to spot the cats on the move are at dawn and dusk.
The summer's fires directly affected deer distribution in the burned areas, which also had an effect on cougar distribution. This occurred particularly as deer began to concentrate for the winter.

In District 6, cougars are now managed by a harvest guideline at the individual GMU level to better promote stable population structure and high quality sustainable harvest. Last season’s harvest fell slightly short of the harvest guideline in most GMUs. As a result, cougar hunting opportunities in District 6 should be good in 2014-15. Remember that after Jan 1, individual GMUs close on short notice once the harvest guideline has been reached, and hunters are responsible for knowing if a unit is open or closed. This information is available on the WDFW hotline (1-866-364-4868) or at http://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/cougar/.

2013 District 6 Cougar Harvest Summary: During the first year under the new harvest guideline system, hunters harvested eleven cougars in District 6 during the 2012-13 season, and by design the harvest was distributed across several GMUs.

2013 District 6 Cougar Harvest Statistics: East Cascades North CMU Cougar Harvest
Overall, waterfowl surveys indicate waterfowl brood production is up modestly in the potholes region of Eastern Washington compared to 2013. Locally, water levels are down due to the hot dry summer and the number of potholes retaining water during the hunting season will likely be reduced. Overall, however, waterfowl hunting opportunities are mostly dependent on the number of migrants coming from Canada and Alaska and how long water remains ice-free throughout the district.

The largest concentrations in District 6 occur at the mouth of the Okanogan River and on the Columbia River. The main stem of the Okanogan River and the larger lakes and potholes in the Okanogan Watershed are good secondary sites. Good public access can be found at the Driscoll Island and Sinlahekin Wildlife areas as well as the Similkameen-Chopaka Unit of the Scotch Creek Wildlife Area.

**2013 District 6 Waterfowl Harvest Summary:** Duck harvest was down 32% in District 6 in 2013, likely due to mild early winter weather up north and extensive ice coverage locally. Conversely, hunters bagged 1,365 Canada geese in 2013, a 7% increase over the 2012 harvest.

**2013 District 6 Waterfowl Harvest Statistics:** [Duck Harvest Statewide and by County](#) [Canada Goose Harvest Statewide and by County](#)
In general, gray partridge populations are widely distributed and patchy throughout the district’s shrub steppe habitats but appear to be increasing in number and distribution over time. Birds are seen frequently on the Indian Dan, Chiliwist, and Methow Wildlife Areas. Scattered groups of chukars are found in the steeper rocky areas in lower elevations of District 6. The steep hills along the Similkameen River in the north part of the Okanogan Valley hold good numbers of birds.

More specifically, dramatically reduced harvest and harvest success without a similar magnitude change in hunter numbers suggests gray partridge and chukar productivity fell sharply in 2013. It appears likely that the cold, wet spring resulted in significant chick mortality.

Originally, more moderate weather this spring suggested productivity and associated harvest opportunity would be better in 2014. This is likely still true in areas outside of the summer burns. Unfortunately, the fires consumed a significant portion of the district’s partridge habitat and bird numbers in those areas will likely be spotty and greatly reduced as a result.

**2013 District 6 Partridge Harvest Summary:** Compared to 2012, both chukar and gray partridge harvest decreased significantly in District 6 last year. Hunters harvested only 137 chukar (a 90% decrease). Similarly, gray partridge declined by 74% with only 370 birds taken.
The Okanogan supports strong populations of ruffed, dusky (blue), and spruce grouse, which are found throughout the forested areas of the district. Ruffed grouse are generally associated with deciduous tree cover at lower to middle elevations, particularly in riparian habitats. Dusky (blue) grouse are found in the mid to upper elevation conifer forests, often on ridge tops. Spruce grouse are located in higher elevation conifer forests throughout the district.

Dusky (blue) and Spruce grouse populations continue to remain below historical norms within the boundaries of recent wildfires including the massive 175,000-acre Tripod Fire, which burned in 2006 in some of the District’s best forest grouse habitat. Grouse habitat within the burns is improving annually, and bird numbers outside of burned areas appear to be relatively stable.

Prior to the fires over the summer, we anticipated generally favorable opportunities for Forest Grouse and harvest success rates similar to last year. As a result of the fires, areas adjacent to and outside of this year’s burn perimeters may see an influx of birds. Conversely, areas within the burns likely have very few birds, although sizeable unburned islands surrounded by charred ground could potentially hold locally concentrated populations. In addition, if significant fall green-up presents itself, some birds may return to burned areas to take advantage of sprouting shoots and buds. The best bets for hunting are likely to be USFS lands throughout the district, as well as forested portions of the Sinlahekin and Methow Wildlife Areas outside of this year’s burn perimeters. In the long-term, the extensive burning at lower elevations may well enhance grouse production in the spring of coming seasons; however, the additional loss of winter habitat at middle and upper elevations may decrease over-winter carrying capacity.

2013 District 6 Forest Grouse Harvest Summary: Despite the lingering effects of recent wildfires, sprawling Okanogan County remained the top forest grouse producer in Washington last year, yielding a mixed harvest of 7,017 dusky, ruffed, and spruce grouse. While impressive, that number represents an 8-percent decline from 2012 and a 45-percent drop from the five-year average harvest average; however, much of the decline can be attributed to reduced hunter participation.

2013 District 6 Forest Grouse Harvest Statistics: Forest Grouse Harvest Statewide and by County
PHEASANT

Pheasants occur at low densities and in a patchy distribution throughout the Okanogan Watershed portion of District 6, with most wild production coming from private land. Hunters should seek permission in advance of the season to access private land. *Game farm-produced roosters will once again be released in the district; however, the Chiliwist release site will not be used this year due to the effects of this summer’s fire at that location. All releases will occur at the traditional Kline and Hegdahl release sites this fall.*

These sites are mapped on the Go Hunt website. Hunters are reminded that nontoxic shot is required for ALL upland bird hunting on ALL pheasant release sites STATEWIDE.

**2013 District 6 Pheasant Harvest Summary:** Hunters bagged 520 pheasants last year in Okanogan County, a drop of almost 50% as compared to 2012 and the current five-year average. Most of this decline can be attributed to a reduced number of released birds.

2013 District 6 Pheasant Harvest Statistics: [Pheasant Harvest Statewide and by County](#)
Harvest data suggest Quail numbers may be down a bit compared to long-term averages. However, birds are numerous and widespread in Okanogan County, which remains a good choice for hunters pursuing this species. Quail can be found in the shrub-steppe habitats at lower elevations throughout the district. The Indian Dan, Chiliwist, and the Sinlahekin Wildlife Areas are traditionally good places to start.

*In general for this season, a mild winter and more favorable spring conditions had set the stage for improved quail prospects as compared to 2013. That may still be true outside of the late August burn areas; however, the fires blackened a significant portion of the district’s quail habitat, including virtually all of the Chiliwist and Indian Dan Canyon portions of the wildlife areas.*

**2013 District 6 Quail Harvest Summary:** Quail harvest dipped slightly from the 2012 tally and is down 18% from the five-year average. Even so, District 6 hunters still bagged about 6,500 birds in 2013.

**2013 District 6 Quail Harvest Statistics:** [Quail Harvest Statewide and by County](#)

Turkeys are found in scattered groups throughout the district and often concentrate on private land near agriculture areas. Prospective hunters should seek permission in advance of the season to access private land. The fall turkey permit season occurs within GMUs 218-231 and 242, with the majority of the birds being located in the latter two units. In recent years, winter conditions and declines in supplemental feeding by private individuals have reduced turkey numbers substantially in the Methow Valley, although most lower-elevation drainages in Unit 242 still harbor birds.

*The late August fires likely pushed turkeys out of the lower elevations in the SE portion GMU 242 and the southern portion of GMU 224.*

The 2013 dove call count surveys tallied bird numbers similar to last year, with overall numbers still down slightly from the 10-year survey average. Look for doves in planted food crops in the Sinlahekin and at lower elevations on other public land. Hunting success will depend on warm weather keeping the birds in the area through the season.

*Much of the dove habitat on the Methow Wildlife Area, as well as the Chiliwist and Indian Dan Canyon Wildlife Area Units, were heavily burned, significantly reducing dove harvest opportunities in District 6 for this season.*
2013 District 6 Dove Harvest Summary: Similar to other shrub-steppe upland game birds, dove harvest decreased 19% as compared to 2012, and remained 28% below the five-year average harvest in the district.

2013 District 6 Mourning Dove Harvest Statistics: Mourning Dove Harvest Statewide and by Count